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CPYRGHT

Story of a Coup

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By FREDERIC NELSON

So now we have David Halberstam's own account of what he saw in Viet Nam, where he, as a correspondent, played his own influential part in the sideline quarterbacking of American policy at the time when Premier Ngo Dinh was being downgraded, thrown out by coup, and finally murdered.

"The Making of a Quagmire" (Random House) will surely rank as Exhibit A in the literature of self-confidence. It is easy enough to understand how a young correspondent, assigned to cover a situation as messy and complicated as the undeclared war in Viet Nam, could be wrong about some phases of the conflict. But that a man who was wrong about so many events out there should write a book to show how right he was (when things have grown dramatically worse since his suggestions were followed) is amazing.

Nevertheless, here it is, the story of the events leading up to the coup which overthrew Premier Diem's government and the assassination of the premier and two of his associates.

Out With Nolting!

Mr. Halberstam's account of the events leading up to this grim catastrophe is in large part an expansion of the pieces he wrote for his newspaper when they were going on. First, there was the problem of Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting, represented here as an industrious and dedicated diplomat but not quite bright.

A man who could say in an interview that he was tired of all the yakking about the Buddhists when the "important thing was to win the war" was clearly far from "with it," in Halberstam's eyes. Nolting's replacement by Henry Cabot Lodge, whose mission Mr. Halberstam thinks was to "demonstrate to the Vietnamese population that we no longer

considered the Ngo family indispensable to the war," cheered Mr. Halberstam's Vietnamese friends, and Mr. Halberstam also.

It remained to get rid of another obstructionist, John Richardson, the C.I.A. representative, who was terribly obtuse in failing to see that it was the Diem tyrants who were making victory impossible. Halberstam's cable to his newspaper (October 3, 1963), indicated that Lodge would be "happier with a new C.I.A. chief." According to the book, our new Ambassador "talked scornfully of the (Diem) family in private life, knowing full well that in a city where there were no secrets his words would soon be all over town. . . . Lastly, Richardson, Nhu's greatest American ally, had been sent home."

Out With Harkins

Great — but not the diplomatic finesse we used to read about. But there was still General Paul D. Harkins to stand in the way of the consummation of America's biggest boo-boo in the Viet Nam affair. Ambassador Lodge was led to believe that General Harkins was poorly informed about events in his area. Generals are always supposed to be completely ignorant of their subject, but Harkins had the additional disadvantage of absence from Washington where the real news of what was going on—or was about to go on—in Viet Nam was being made.

Ambassador Lodge, of course, brought all this news with him. However General Harkins managed to survive the crisis to become the post-coup butt of new innuendos. Mr. Halberstam reported that the right kind of people in Viet Nam regarded the general as a "symbol of the old order."

Nam in November of 1963, and certainly no American support of one, had it not been for the uproar over the supposed persecution of innocent Buddhists. Like other correspondents, Mr. Halberstam devotes much attention to this. This is understandable because he had seen a Buddhist priest on fire and experienced natural revulsion at the supposed tyrannies which drove the poor man to such extremes.

But now that the Buddhist persecutions have been exposed for the frauds most of them were, it is disappointing to find a responsible journalist, even a liberal one, sticking to that story.

The Buddhists' Role

The United Nations fact-finding mission, whose report has been widely ignored by the press, found little evidence of persecution on religious grounds, and considerable evidence to indicate that fanatical zeal alone did not explain all these self-immolations. Drugs and even violence played a significant part.

The Diem government, besides being notoriously inept in public relations, took a strong line against politically

active Buddhists. After all, there was a civil war in progress. Even Abraham Lincoln, with his capital and government infiltrated by Confederate spies and agents, took a dim view of *habeas corpus* in all circumstances.

Mr. Halberstam reminds us that Lodge, far from suspecting any hanky-panky, granted asylum in his embassy to Thich Tri Quang, whom Mr. Halberstam calls "the enigmatic leader of the Buddhist movement," and whom other correspondents have identified as an admitted "former" member of the Communist "Liberation front" and probably still a Communist agent.

The Viet Nam war is still in the quagmire stage. The C. I. A.'s prediction that the overthrow of Diem would set the war back a year has been more than justified, but all this rolls off Mr. Halberstam's back. Every man and his brother has an opinion of what should be done, and I don't find this writer's suggestions much better than what you hear on the bus. Of course it isn't all Mr. Halberstam's fault that Viet Nam is a quagmire, but he certainly threw his share of the mud.